DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 343 398 FL 020 077

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TITLE Meaning and Diversity.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 7p.; In: Equality in Language Learning. Proceedings of the Nordic Conference of Applied Linguistics (5th, Jyvaskyla, Finland, June 4-7, 1987); see FL 020 065.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Applied Linguistics; *Cultural Pluralism; Curriculum Design; Demography; Higher Education; *Intercultural Communication; *Language Variation; *Multicultural Education; Second Language Instruction; *Second Languages; *Semiotics; Student Characteristics

ABSTRACT

College second language instruction can no longer afford to apply uniform methods and curricula to an increasingly diverse student population. To be realistic, it must be integrated with individual interests, attitudes, personality, and values. The best approach is for students to go individually to the countries of their target languages. The next best strategy is to send them in groups. The minimum stay should be a year. Because different languages do not correspond word for word, language learners must have the experience of explaining their own history and culture in the target language. Language learning content should include issues of contemporary importance, because intercultural communication on current developments in human relations, human rights, cultural heritage, peace and international understanding is vital. Semiotics, seen as both a game and a scientific enterprise, can help to renew enjoyment and appreciation of literature. The social aspects of meaning in language are as important as the individual, cognitive aspects. A brief list of suggested readings is included. (MSE)

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MEANING AND DIVERSITY

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The low budgets for the humanities lead to a new concept of a pedagogical accuracy, and to a much more bureaucratical approach to learning and teaching languages at the university level. I propose, as a part of the necessary rethinking, that we concentrate on three things: meaning of the teaching materials; diversity in presenting the countries which use the chosen foreign language; and, as a consequence, individualization of teaching.

For a new orientation we may turn to American semantics, European pragmatism, or Asiatic computing, and next year somebody will come home from Australia and tell about the Task Force. We shall hear more about multiculturalism in early childhood and the later stages of life. I have found some inspiration also in language philosophy and in books written by Greimas's pupils.

If you live in a country where methods are free, where you have no central institute to decide for you in which direction your teaching must go, you have the chance to follow your own understanding of the world situation, but you also face the risk of seeing an enormous discrepancy between the official policy and the expectations and hopes of your students.

Education in general fails to reflect, or respond to, the cultural and linguistic diversity of our own societies for many reasons. One of the most basic ones is the virtual exclusion of persons of minority ethnic communities from decision-making processes. Legislation in this field is absent or not effective. Absence of adequate information and statistical data is another reason why it is not possible to make a comprehensive analysis of the situation.

Talking about meaning or signification means talking about it as a basic principle. By the learn-from-your errors method we have seen that you cannot present England and the products of the English people from the point of view of an Eaton boy. But you should not forget that he still exists. Sociolinguistics will tell us to present things differently to different groups of people. At various universities in Europe, nowadays, the

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students are very different as regards age and background, and it becomes more and more necessary to know them personally to direct them properly and not to lose them.

Societies move very fast, dictionaries change very often, and in some societies, ie. very big cities, language develops at a rate that cannot be followed by all persons, by all generations or by all professions, so that literature, to be understood by the young generation of certain countries, should be rewritten every 20 years.

Big cities are the place where language and "sociolects" are developed. The diversity of products of language there must be listened to and studied by our students, but they must not forget the 'old' diversity, that of the dialects. It will be an important task for all university teachers to draw in oral and written materials under the aspect of diversity. But it must be done in all the modern, still spoken, languages.

It is time to think of the language situation in our own country in order to understand the cultural background of our own students, but we should also think of the choice of foreign languages to be taught, a choice made by parliament and the ministry of education, as seems generally to be the case. One language seems to conquer the world: American English. There is only one place, as far as I know, where this language is in some kind of danger; it is the southern parts of the U.S.A. But in our Scandinavian countries this domination of one foreign language means a loss of good cultural influence, which we need because of the enforced poverty of our own culture.

Unity of culture and unity of language have always been the ideal of the tyrants. Babel was not a tower, but a city. By unity of language it could be dominated as we can read in the First Book of Moses.

It is in this perspective of the easy way, that of unity, that university teachers can work for a better understanding, both larger and more profound, by presenting grammar and phonetics as <u>some</u> people's grammar and by studying the <u>background</u> of the text to be translated or the subject to be treated in discussions or in a written form. We deal with so many forms and kinds of materials that we easily lose the perspective of the language as a whole. The different parts of the studies of foreign languages deal with signs and only a little bit with signification. The humanities have taken over the views and the vocabulary of the 'exact sciences', which, again, long for the humanistic point of view for their own subjects. By insisting on the signification aspect we can renew the studies and perhaps save the computer generation from boredom.

The cognitive way of stimulation and motivation, "grammaire notionnelle-fonctionnelle", simulations of real situations, fantasy games, will certainly make students of a language advance faster, and the scientific results psychology, sociology, medicine and brain-studies will have of a larger and still faster impact on the understanding of what languages are and on the teaching of them. But teaching and research in universities continue to take little account of the multicultural nature of the surrounding society and less account of the multicultural nature and the fast changes of the societies whose languages we study, or rather, whose languages we are still allowed to study.

To study a language takes time. So we cannot lose time by letting students learn together. They will have to learn by heart individually, the means are there; the acquisition of abilities must be left to computers and only be checked by teachers. Teachers must focus on theoretical and cognitive aspects to make students work intensively and to avoid dullness and apathy.

It has been said that there are too many losers in our societies, but there are also many losers at our universities. It seems so, but some students abandon their studies because they feel that they are given stones for bread. The intellectual part of language studies must be developed to a much higher degree, and in a shorter period for individual study, in order to contribute to the intellectual context of the individual and society. We know a little more about heritage and background, will and ambitions, individual and collective education than we did during the heyday of structuralism. Even Makarenko and his effective collective schooling system have changed somewhat. Now you hear of talking to the imagination and the 'heart' of the student, and the 'meaning' of the situation from the student's point of view. You may now orient your students toward the application of the problem-oriented method. That will make our students look for the 'meaning' of what they are doing and stimulate the interest in applying theories.

The Soviet psychologists Leontiev and Rubinstein have declared that one of the reasons for an unsuccessful languagelearningprocess is the application of a uniform, one-and-only method used to give equal opportunities to all students. Their argument is that language is a sort of activity for human beings. And they say that a foreign language is more easily learnt in situation which imitate the real ones. The consequence must be that you cannot acquire a foreign language if the study of it is

separated from the rest of a person's interests and goals in life, from his or her attitudes, personality, and values.

The Strasbourg plan seems to suffer from smaller and smaller budgets. The Threshold Level and 'le Niveau Seuil' have already reached the school books and the ideas about communication are there to stay. But in order to communicate properly with other human beings you must know each other, and the teacher should bear in mind a detailed 'portrait' of the student, so that each student can feel that he makes progress for his own part, and not only that the group in which he has been accidentally placed has advanced in knowledge. The best thing you can do for the students is to send them, one by one, to the countries of their speciality; the second best is to send them along in groups the way they do in England. If you go with them, it will have an impact, good perhaps, on their work, but they will not have the impression that they have really visited a foreign country. And it has not yet been possible for all students to stay more than one month a year in a country where their chosen foreign languages are spoken by the majority of the population. One year should be the minimum.

The get lost, to feel lost, seems to be an experience essential for language learners. We do not know what we will be able to do by help of machines, but what we do know is that languages do not correspond to each other, word by word. Therefore, it is necessary that learners get used to explaining and discussing the history, the situation of today and the ways of thinking of their own country in the foreign language which they have chosen to study. Likewise, the training in translation should be primarily an analysis of the text, spoken or written, in the foreign language much more often than that of a text in the mother tongue. The meaning, there again, is the most important.

What the subjects should be in the large field of communication is a question of the needs of the world as we all know. It seems as if academic culture is regressing, not only because it is not possible to become a polyglot or a polyhistorian but also because we do not seem to try. It becomes apparent to us that we could have done more when things like the Chernobyl accident happen, when it is difficult to explain why there was no communication.

Issues like antiracism, human rights, cultural heritage, peace and international understanding shall be our subjects and our students should be able to discuss them in three, four or five languages. They will be the

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major issues in the world for a long period of time. And we can start with refugees, who produce diversity in our uniform societies.

Semiotics can teach us to enjoy literature again. Literature, which is a discovery of the Western World amongst the pleasures of life, ie. a pleasure of reading and enjoying books, is disappearing. Semiotics can be a game and a scientific project which can lead us back to this pleasure, says Greimas, who talks about 'seme' as the smallest element of signification, about semiology as the study of significations in general; semantics studies significations in 'langue', and semiotics studies significations in 'discours'. 'Langue' vs. 'discours' almost equals Saussure's 'langue' vs. 'parole'. Thus 'discours' means the individual use of language in a certain concrete situation.

In the semiotic project you see how a science is growing up, a science concerning elements of language which have been hidden. The study of significations has been very much delayed as compared to fields like phonology and grammar. And it is no accident because many significations are of a non-material kind. You cannot see them, you cannot measure them. The perception of them comes from something that can be called (linguistic) intuition.

Intuition is subjective, and a real science cannot have a subjective object. So the scientific status has been low. If the semantic project should become a science it means that it must eliminate all subjectivity and produce a proof, like a mathematical demonstration, which is reproducible on the basis of formulas.

In semantics, reference is constantly made to feelings: 'linguistic feeling' is a necessary explanation, "I see it like this..", "I understand the words so and so..". Can such a project find a part of linguistic intuition which is not personal? What do you do about subjectivity? Generally an attempt is made to find a consensus with others in reference to dictionaries, doctrines, colleagues, etc.

Anne Hénault says in "Les enjeux de la sémiotique" that when the interindividual exchange has started and you admit that meaning has not only individual signification for an individual, but it also circulates, you must recognize that the interior eye which tells everyone what a certain meaning is has a double nature:

(1) 'intuition idiolectale' refers to the individual nature, ie. a specific and subjective linguistic feeling; and
(2) 'conscience séméiologique' or 'solidarité sémantique' is the social nature of the linguistic feeling.

Pottier and Bloomfield have refrained from touching the descriptions of significations. There will be others who will take it as a challenge to find out what semantic solidarity, the second part of the linguistic intuition, can be. It is very important to possess it, and to know that you possess it, when you work with languages.

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